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THE LAST WORD

Suspicious characters

Margaret Lacey

My husband received his CIA file in the mail not long ago, after requesting it on March 2, 1978. The file consists of a clipping from *The New York Times* dated August 12, 1958, a memorandum from which all information has been blacked out by the censor, and three personal letters sent from the United States to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1959. We are advised that the blacked-out portions contain information which was obtained on a privileged or confidential basis, or from a foreign government, or that it involved agency names, techniques, and sources. One wonders what the CIA thought it would accomplish by spending our money to mail us the mutilated page, since it is of no more informational value than a blank sheet of paper.

The clipping from *The Times* is much more useful; in fact, it explains every item in the file. It concerns three young Russians who came to this country in the summer of 1958 as guests of the Young Friends of North America, a loosely organized nationwide group of young Quakers who met annually to pray, to find spouses, and to attempt to promote world understanding through personal encounters with people of divergent views. In 1958, special notice was being taken of such groups.

My husband-to-be was part of the host group which conducted the Russians around the country, skirting areas designated as off-limits to Soviet citizens in retaliation against areas of the Soviet Union that were off-limits to Americans. When he left the tour early to come to Iowa so we could be married, he reported that the main problem—apart from having to detour from Knoxville so as to approach Chicago from the west—seemed to be the Russians' distaste for maple syrup on their pancakes.

After the young Russians returned home, a reciprocal invitation came to the Young Friends in the fall of 1958: A like number of Americans were to tour Russia for a month in the summer of 1959, under the auspices of the official Soviet Youth Organization. My husband and I and two other men were chosen to go. I suppose the worst thing that could be said about us was that we were naive. We certainly did not behave like spies, as the FBI and the CIA must have discovered by following our internal correspondence while we prepared for the trip.

Our stay in the Soviet Union was comfortable—we stayed in plush hotels and ate in enormous and opulent restaurants—but we didn't have much fun: We were not ready for the well-schooled and aggressive young Russians we encountered, and dialectically they left us far behind. But they did not persuade us; we were all surprised at the surge of pure patriotism that rose in us at the first challenge. Soon we found ourselves digging in our heels, politically, in ways that would have astounded our friends at home. We metamorphosed from members of America's loyal opposition to something akin to Eisenhower Republicans. We were all pacifists, but if we did not exactly defend the arms race, we heard ourselves earnestly trying to explain to young Russians why America kept up its defenses. Whatever else we might have accomplished in the field of international understanding that month, we did not bring comfort to the Soviet government from American Quakers. Whoever was monitoring us there must have suspected, at times, that we were American operatives ourselves, albeit imperfectly trained.

It is intriguing to discover that for twenty years the CIA has had us classified as possible spies. Each of the three letters in the file had been opened in New York, as the CIA now tells us, "under an intercept program called HTLINGUAL. This activity dealt with mail flowing between New York City and the U.S.S.R. from 1956 until *1973* [italics my own], when it was terminated."

One of the letters, which we opened in Moscow upon our return from Tashkent, contained suggestions of books on prayer, to be read in preparation for the next Young Friends' conference. It never referred to our trip, except to wish us well. A second, from my parents, detailed life on our Iowa farm in June 1959; it told of finishing the corn planting, and of sorrow at the loss of a nest of baby cardinals to an owl. My mother reported that my aged grandfather had felt up to pulling weeds in the flower beds. A line had been drawn alongside the section which interested the CIA, a humorous postscript from my younger sister, which read in full: "Hello! I'm having fun telling all my friends that my sister and her husband are going to Russia. People around here always did suspect us of having communist leanings. I've got your last year's Christmas present ready for you when you get home. Love, Evie."

The last letter was from a friend who was trying out her Russian on us. Near the end she reproduced a gleeful Snoopy from the "Peanuts" comic strip; beside it she wrote, "How do you suppose the censor will interpret this?" She meant the Russian censor; it never occurred to her—or to us—that an American would place a mark beside her words and reproduce her letter for storage in a U.S. Government file.

Our friend's letter concluded, "I really sat down to write something profound . . . something expressing my hopes for your trip and its values and success (whatever 'success' in such an endeavor is) . . . but all that will have to be left unsaid and just understood." The possible meaning of those cryptic words must have presented the ultimate challenge to the decoder.

I trust the CIA has been able to read between the lines by now, and has worked out the import of all that was left unsaid. And if the code has been broken, the Agency must have come to its final conclusion about the menace we offered to American security that summer long ago.

We still can't hope that America's spies understand what we were trying to accomplish with the two visits. But after twenty years we begin to breathe a little easier, and we have ceased to look back over our shoulders. We really doubt they will come after us now. ■

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